

Noyes (I. P.)

Prof. John Peirce.



PROF. JOHN PEIRCE.

Another worthy son of Rhode Island and the "Providence plantations" has passed beyond the river to the regions where the spirits immortal dwell. That spirit while on earth bore the very plain and Quaker-like name of "John Peirce." He entered this life August 16th, 1836, and departed from us March 3d, 1897.

His face and form was familiar to the older residents of Providence, whose duties or inclinations bring them in contact with that which gives the settlement of Roger Williams such a grand rank among the true nobility of the earth. If there ever was a man simple in his tastes it was John Peirce. No one, I think, ever saw in his face or form that spirit of *hauteur* that at times we see in men of smaller calibre, who seem to think that unless they assume such an air the world will not worship them. The lower classes may in this see something to worship, but the higher grades—men of real ability and good sense do not worship at any such shrine. They have the utmost contempt for it, unless perhaps as an amusement, as in the "Cake Walker," colored minstrel, or the "Drum Major."

Among people of culture and intelligence the plain, natural and able man is known without any such signs as the "Cake Walker," the negro minstrel or the "Drum Major" might envy.

While professor Peirce was not a man to assume any air of *hauteur*, he was not lacking in dignity. Like the noble man he was, his dignity grew with the occasion. He was unlike the ship of mere *painted ports* carried for the purpose of attempting to inspire fear. On the contrary he was more like a well armed vessel that makes no outward show of its heavy armament. Then he was a kind man; and if all could come up and give their personal testimony of the quiet kindness that they had received from John Peirce, their contributions would fill many columns. He was a few years my senior, and often came into the office of A. C. Morse, architect, where I was acquiring knowledge of architecture. He was associated, in a quiet way, with professor Hill, who was so instrumental and so zealous in the cause of the new laboratory at "Brown." Probably few persons realize that this laboratory of "Brown," where professor John Peirce often labored, was, at the time of its erection (1861,) the most approved and best planned building of its kind in the United States. Under the direction of professor Hill, then the younger professor of chemistry at "Brown," with A. C. Morse as architect, that laboratory was built.

It was a new departure, and but for the zeal of professor Hill, sustained by such men as Dr. T. P. Shepard and professor George I. Chase, "old Brown" would not, then at least, have had the advantage of so fine a laboratory. Professor Peirce was then a young man, but he was, to a great extent, associated with men much older in the field than

himself; and undoubtedly this association was highly beneficial to him; it certainly is to the young man who can appreciate it. And if there ever was a young man who could profit by such association it was the subject of this sketch. His kindness was first revealed to me, when, almost daily he came in to see how the plans of the laboratory were progressing, that I, under the instruction of Mr. Morse, was working upon. He then ranked me by a few years in age, in knowledge and in social position; and yet he freely associated with me, and in a quiet manner that did not imply any superiority on his part, he imparted instruction and threw out hints that were indeed valuable. And in the same manner that he was kind to me he was to many others.

At this time professor Peirce was a tall and very slender man—indeed up to within a few years of his death he was of very slender build, but during the last few years of his life he became very large and stout. With his burden of flesh upon him he never looked natural to me, and yet he was the same kind and genial spirit. When in his younger years I met him, he would often say that a man never got fat until he was satisfied. So when I met him, two or three years before his death, when he had become so immense in size, I said to him, jokingly: "Professor, you must be quite well satisfied now." He looked at me with a good natured interrogation sign in his eyes, and asked "Why?" Then I recalled to him his early philosophy. He smiled, but I could see that he was not satisfied with the amount of flesh that he was then burdened with. His organs for developing flesh were in good order, and perhaps too active for the sedentary life that he was leading.

As a rule the professional men and students of the world are not good business men. Once in a while we see an exception, and professor Peirce was one of them. He was a good business man and took interest in the ways of business, from his earliest years, in the money line, he seems to have been well provided for; so, as with some, there was no struggle against poverty. But while the world was kind to him in this line, this good fortune did not spoil him nor unfit him for his intellectual aspirations, on the contrary it gave him the better opportunity to work on the lines of his inclinations; and these inclinations we know were most worthy, and highly beneficial to the state.

To invent was as natural for him as it is for the artist to paint.

When people see a great invention they too often think that it is all due to some one man, who by some good fortune is associated with it. Take the telephone for instance; it is the product of no one man's genius—it grew and grew. In the perfection of it however professor John Peirce was prominent, and did far more for it than some who have reaped fame and fortune through this channel. To the world at large his work in this line is not known, but to his intimate friends it is well known. He was an expert in many lines. Like Dr. Shepard he was a first-class photographer, and even instructor. But in

the line of *wool dyeing* he has probably conferred the greatest benefit to a centre like the "Providence plantations." Before he entered upon his patient and careful experiments in this line the dyeing of wool was confined to a few dyers, who seemed to keep the knowledge of it to themselves, to guard their secrets and to impress the world with the superiority of their skill. But now there appears a man on the scene who takes hold of the subject in an intelligent manner, and handles it as it never had been handled before. He was a chemist, and not only a chemist but an inventor and practical man. In the new laboratory of "Brown" he labored, and there to-day may be seen his work. Wool dyeing no longer depends upon the good, bad and indifferent receipts of the old time dyer; but upon exact knowledge. No patents were secured, nor was his name heralded from world's end to world's end; but to the world's end the blessing that emanated from him will flow, and many millions of his fellowmen will receive the benefit of his quiet and unambitious work. Work that was pushed, day after day, through the workings of that inward spirit in man that bids him to go on, and ever on, and overcome the earth. Not in the spirit of the Alexanders and Napoleons of the world, but in the spirit of the many immortals who have blessed this world of ours, yet who strange to say have received little or no honor or credit from their fellowmen. It is a queer freak of human nature, that prompts mankind to worship at the shrines that they so often do. They too often worship the mere destroyers and erect their monuments to the cunning knaves of the world and let their real benefactors be forgotten and their names pass into oblivion. Whether this shall continue or not remains with the intelligent world to say. Already there is a little light here and there appearing, and ere long those little lights may so grow and extend as to seem like one great light. Then we shall have that glorious condition so many thousands of years ago foretold, and earnestly labored for by the old Hebrew prophets and philosophers—when the destructive spirit in man shall pass to those shades where the destructive animals of the world are fast passing to—to be buried in caves of darkness where they and their miserable works and examples belong.

In that bright future, which so many good men and women are laboring for, the monument and recorded page will be for the real heroes and benefactors of the race, and not for those who simply become conspicuous through the agency of low ambition.

The monuments—the tablets—and the recorded pages of the future, while they should, and will honor many worthy names, they would be incomplete did they fail to bear testimony of the high worth and noble qualities of Professor John Peirce.

L. P. N.

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